

ARKANSAS BUSINESS 20

20 Arkansas Icons



KAAY: The Mighty 1090 Gave Arkansas to North America

By Stephen Koch

For a few magic years, for music fans throughout a figure-eight centered in Little Rock and stretching from Canada to Cuba, one radio station was king of the nighttime airwaves: KAAY-AM, The Mighty 1090.

Launched in July 1962, KAAY was the state's only 50,000-watt station.

"KAAY was an unusual radio station," said station announcer and engineer Clyde Clifford. KAAY — with Clifford, station

manager Pat Walsh and a host of others — is credited with hipping many an ear beyond the state's borders to the new sounds of the '60s.

"It was a powerhouse station in a smaller market ... We literally got bushel baskets of [fan] mail," said Clifford, who was host of the station's groundbreaking progressive-rock Sunday night program "Beaker Street."

By the time KAAY arrived, radio had already faced down the threat of that upstart broadcast medium, television. But the parents of many of those Beaker Street fans could remember a day when broadcast was strictly an agricultural word to describe the scattering of seed.

It is difficult to imagine the sense of wonder Arkansawyers had in hearing their first radio broadcasts. In an era when cell phones also take snapshots for us, the very extent of current technology seems to make us increasingly hard to impress, much less amaze.

The state's own broadcasting history can be traced to 1922, when commercial licenses — which then had to be renewed every three months — were granted to stations WOK in Pine Bluff and WSV in Little Rock.

The elite with radio receivers prior to this time could sometimes pick up out-of-state stations, but broadcasting was still very much an emerging field. Few had sets; fewer still had stations.

But through the years, the radio craze spread. Entrepreneurs started stations across Arkansas. Station KTHS ("Kum To Hot Springs") set up in the rebuilt Arlington Hotel in late 1924. In August 1928, KTHS officially notified Arkansas Sen. Joe T. Robinson of his nomination for Democratic vice-presidential candidate.

The Hot Springs station also was the launching pad of comedic radio stars Lum and Abner and country music's first female million-seller, Patsy "I Want to Be a Cowboy's Sweetheart" Montana of Jessieville, among many others. KTHS was additionally a stated inspiration for songwriter Henry Glover, the Hot Springs-born producer and musician who wrote "Drown in My Own Tears," "Peppermint Twist" and more. KUOA in Fayetteville broadcast President Roosevelt's June 10, 1936, address in Little Rock commemorating the state's centennial.

In the Arkansas Delta, a young J.R. Cash — later Johnny — was first heard on the airwaves on Blytheville's KLCN. Stations like West Memphis's KWEM and Helena's KFFA with its "King Biscuit Time" began bringing live blues music into households in the 1940s. As a boy, Levon Helm of nearby Turkey Scratch witnessed several episodes of "King Biscuit Time" live in the KFFA studios with legendary blues vocalist and harmonica player Sonny Boy Williamson.

"That was about as good as it got," Helm said of the sessions.

Helm later performed in The Band, which helped Bob Dylan "go electric" in the mid-1960s before releasing its own acclaimed rock albums.

For those living in rural or isolated areas, radio has a special appeal. In sparsely populated Arkansas, radio connected listeners to the rest of the world — and their own communities — in ways the telegraph and the newspaper could not.

In 1974, the only history of Arkansas broadcasting was published, "Arkansas Airwaves," by Walnut Ridge-born radio man Ray Poindexter. The Poindexter Committee, named in Ray's honor, was organized in 2003 by the University of Arkansas at Little Rock School of Mass Media to extend Poindexter's work in better documenting the history of Arkansas electronic media.

A Young Upstart

Following World War II, both interest in and demand for radio continued to rise. More than 90 percent of American homes had radios by the late 1940s, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

On July 2, 1952, radio station KBNY broadcast an exclusive — a speech at the Newport Airport by President Truman, who was in the state to dedicate the Bull Shoals and Norfolk dams.

A new medium rising in Arkansas at about the same time would soon make such exclusivity by radio a thing of the past.

KRTV, the state's first UHF television station, made its debut in Little Rock on April 5, 1953. It would later be home to the popular children's program "Betty's Little Rascals" and be sold a year later to KATV. KATV, Channel 7, Little Rock's ABC affiliate, recently celebrated 50 years on the air.

KATV was the state's first VHF television station, making its debut in Pine Bluff in December 1953 — a few months after the debut of KRTV. A few months after this, KARK, located at 10th and Spring streets, became the first VHF television station licensed for Little Rock — and as the area's NBC affiliate, KARK is also still extant in the city. Sister radio station KARK was located in the same building in an early display of media synergy; many radio station owners fought — and feared — the new technology.

Conventional wisdom at that time was that television would make radio obsolete. While television would eventually supplant radio as the appliance around which families would gather for news and entertainment in their homes, automobiles — another emerging American obsession — helped keep radio vital.

Things were changing in the world of broadcasting, but that was the nature of its short history. KVLC in Little Rock is considered the first radio station in Arkansas to regularly play the new craze, rock 'n' roll. In 1957, Little Rock's 2-year-old KTHV, Channel 11, began airing the teenage dance program "Steve's Show," with host Steve Stephens, which was popular beyond expectation.

In May 1957, KASU became the state's first educational radio station on the air. Located on the campus of Arkansas State College in Jonesboro, KASU reflected the eventual name of Arkansas State University a decade before it became a university. (Arizona State College had already claimed the KASC call letters. Arizona tried to trade call letters with KASU when it became a university in 1958, but it was rebuffed.) Today, KASU is a 100,000-watt

National Public Radio affiliate.

In December 1966, KETS in Little Rock became the state's first educational television station. Programming initially ran Monday-Friday 9 a.m.-8 p.m., all black and white. Color didn't hit the KETS airwaves until 1972, but the future Arkansas Educational Television Network would soon cover the state.

Training Ground

The first radio station in the state geared exclusively to all-black programming and audiences, KOKY, made its debut in October 1956. The call letters still exist today, and the station remains true to its original audience, now termed "urban." Al Bell learned to jock at the original KOKY with studios near Little Rock Central High School at 1604 W. 14th St.

Bell later recalled that black and white students alike would gather at the KOKY studios to dance and socialize before school — even during the September 1957 apex of the desegregation "crisis." He continued jocking and went on to work as a student-teacher in Dr. Martin Luther King's Southern Christian Leadership Council and later became head of Stax Records in Memphis. Bell said the integrated scene at KOKY "had subconsciously influenced me."

Stations in Little Rock saw their first real tastes of a worldwide local story in the Central High School situation; in many ways it could be seen as local media's coming of age, in addition to the broader social coming of age.

Although some station owners resisted the initial introduction of television, radio stations were usually the first places talent was found for fledgling TV operations. Things are slightly more specialized these days, but most universities combine the radio and TV disciplines — disciplines still relatively new to the academic world.

For example, Gary Weir, later KATV's Bozo the Clown and now the host of horseracing programs from Oaklawn Park, was first a disc jockey. So was Lloyd Denney, who played Captain Kark of "Captain Kark and the Three Stooges" on KARK, Channel 4, from 1960-67.

In the mornings, Denney was an announcer on KARK radio. In the afternoons, Denney would don what he termed a "deputy sheriff" costume and host the TV show. There was little training for being on-camera talent then, but drama and speech training in high school and college meant "playing a character wasn't a stretch," Denney said.

Incongruously enough, Denney, as Captain Kark, would give safety tips to his young viewers between rebroadcast shorts of the hardcore slapstick of the Three Stooges whacking themselves senseless. "My safety tips would be short, and then back to the Stooges," he said. Captain Kark also made plenty of public appearances wherever large groups of children could be found.

"I was on [radio] for a year in Fort Smith," Denny says, "and from 1951 to 1955, I was in radio in Forrest City. I moved to Little Rock in 1955 to work for KARK-TV and radio." Denney said he "thought at that time that radio would fade into the background. It didn't."

Without the luxury of videotape, Denney was also responsible for doing live commercials for sponsors, selling things like yo-yos, cupcakes and children's vitamins. "National advertisers placed pressure to do local commercials with local personalities," he explained.

Although he maintains his seven-year turn as the good Captain Kark was his "only claim to fame," Denney can still be heard on the air after more than a half-century, doing gospel on KGHT-AM, 880, in Little Rock.

"I still love it," he said while running a board shift on KGHT. "Give me 20 more years."

The Mighty 1090

In Arkansas and the nation, the most marked changes in broadcasting's accelerated evolution to today are arguably the trends away from local ownership and local programming toward media conglomerates and network fare. The number of all types of stations has increased dramatically while the number of owners has dwindled.

With the advent of the home computer and new ways to spread new musical sounds — like MP3s and subscription-only satellite radio — broadcasters are facing another issue: shrinking and segmented audiences.

But the audience was enormous back in 1966, when Clyde Clifford got the job of hosting KAAY's "Beaker Street" because the Federal Communications Commission required an engineer to be on duty at the transmitter.

"I was out there at the transmitter anyway," he said.

The eerie background music of "Beaker Street" was used to mask the hum of the machinery since the show didn't broadcast from a conventional studio.

"We wanted it to sound really trippy," Clifford said.

Despite being in the center of the country, as far away from the recording centers of the East and West Coasts as it was possible to be, KAAY was bringing groundbreaking music to the heartland.

"I knew there was a lot of stuff we were doing that no one else was doing — that we were 'out there,'" Clifford said of KAAY. "We were rocking, but we weren't really a rock station. Some country would slip in, some soul would slip in, even some jazz would slip in. Nothing extreme, but not a strict format. We even aired farm markets."

The advent of FM radio saw improved sound and steady — although less far-reaching — signals. Rock-formatted stations migrated to FM, a change Clifford calls "hard to explain. There was just change in the air at that time. It was like the change from spring to summer — you didn't really notice."

Clifford himself moved to FM in 1974 — to Little Rock's KLAZ, 98.5 — and "Beaker Street" was abandoned.

The legend of KAAY and the prog-rock show only increased as KAAY finally "went pure religious" in the 1980s. There was a celebratory last day of broadcasting in the original format with original staff, culminating with the return of Clifford to do a final broadcast of "Beaker Street" on KAAY.

"I thought that was the last radio I'd ever do," Clifford said.

Improbably, in the late 1980s, "Beaker Street" was resurrected on FM and again on Sunday nights. Now, Little Rock's classic rock stalwart Magic 105 has aired Clifford's "Beaker Street" longer than the original lasted on KAAY.

A block of religious programming airing earlier on Sundays helped pay for the airtime of "Beaker Street" on KAAY during the hippie prog-rock show's initial run. Meanwhile, "the Mighty 1090" itself has exclusively broadcast Christian sermons since the 1980s. KAAY still carries on in its storied call letter form — and its storied power.

"It was a great time to be in radio," Clifford said of KAAY's heyday. "It was a great time to be in Little Rock."

(Stephen Koch first deejayed at KWAK in Stuttgart as a teenager. Koch currently hosts the award-winning weekly radio segment "Arkansongs," heard Fridays in Little Rock at 6:40 a.m. and 6:20 p.m. on National Public Radio affiliate KUAR-FM, 89.)